

Sarkozy threatens 'consequences' as Russia stalls on Georgia pullout

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French president demands Moscow honour ceasefire as Medvedev pledges troops will begin withdrawal tomorrow

France warns Russia of 'consequences' if Georgia deal not respected
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(PARIS) - French President Nicolas Sarkozy has warned his Russian counterpart Dmitry Medvedev of "serious consequences" if Russia fails to implement a peace deal with Georgia, his office said Sunday.

Sarkozy told Medvedev in a phone conversation of the "serious consequences that a failure to quickly and fully implement the deal would have on relations between Russia and the European Union."

Medvedev on Saturday signed a six-point peace deal -- brokered by Sarkozy, whose country holds the EU rotating presidency -- a day after Georgia's pro-Western President Mikheil Saakashvili, to end the fighting in Georgia.

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Ian Traynor in Brussels and Luke Harding in Tbilisi guardian.co.uk, Sunday August 17 2008 17:14 BST

European leaders warned Russia today to withdraw forces rapidly from Georgia or face unspecified "consequences", as Moscow stalled on its pledges to honour a ceasefire and pull back thousands of troops from the Caucasus republic.

With the US and European governments due to meet on Tuesday to consider their options for the first time since the crisis erupted, the French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, threatened the Kremlin with an ultimatum for the first time, warning that more delays to a pullout "would have serious consequences on relations between Russia and the European Union".

The French warning echoed similar statements from the Americans in recent days, none of which appear to have rattled the Russians, whose forces remain in firm control of large tracts of Georgia well beyond the two separatist enclaves of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

"People are going to begin to wonder if Russia can be trusted," Condoleezza Rice, the US secretary of state, said today of the Russian failure to keep its promises.

The German chancellor, Angela Merkel, added her voice to the pressure on Moscow after holding talks with the Georgian president, Mikheil Saakashvili, in the capital, Tbilisi. She described a Russian retreat as "urgent" and said it should be "very fast, very prompt".

In Moscow, President Dmitri Medvedev told Sarkozy the Russians would start pulling out tomorrow. But there is a yawning gap between what the Russians and the west understand by withdrawal. Today, Russian forces appeared to be entrenching their positions on the ground barely 20 miles from Tbilisi.

Nato foreign ministers are to hold an emergency meeting in Brussels on Tuesday. The Americans could call for a suspension of the Nato-Russia council, a talking shop that dates back more than a decade and symbolises the post-cold war rapprochement that has been shaken by the invasion of Georgia.

The conflict has reopened old rifts among the western allies that recall the old Europe-new Europe divisions over the Iraq war in 2003. France and Germany are keen to maintain smooth relations with Moscow and fear the EU's mediation role will be jeopardised if they take sides.

The eastern Europeans in Nato and the EU are strongly on the side of Georgia, looking not to Brussels, Paris or Berlin but to Washington for leadership. The Polish president, Lech Kaczynski, slammed France and Germany for being too soft on Moscow and complained they were trying to monopolise the EU position.

France was unapologetic. "We have to invent a new language with regard to Russia. That is what the European Union is trying to do," said Bernard Kouchner, the French foreign minister.

Sarkozy, the current EU president who negotiated a six-point ceasefire agreement with the Russians and Georgians last week, called for the "withdrawal, without delay, of all the Russian military forces that entered Georgia since August 7" when the fighting started.

The Russians, with an estimated 10,000 troops and 150 tanks in Georgia, show no intention of withdrawing the entire invasion force and are planning to leave troops in Georgia proper, beyond the two pro-Russian breakaway provinces.

The Kremlin announced that from tomorrow "Russia will begin the withdrawal of the military contingent which was moved to reinforce Russian peacekeepers after the Georgian aggression against South Ossetia." But it stressed that the invasion force would not retreat to Russia but only to South Ossetia, and that Moscow would keep forces in the "security zone".

The Russians intend to establish buffer zones in previously Georgian-controlled territory beyond South Ossetia and Abkhazia. One of the most contentious points of Sarkozy's ceasefire plan allows Moscow "to take additional security measures" beyond the two enclaves until "an international mechanism" is established.

Sarkozy said this weekend that meant there could be no Russian presence in Georgian urban centres. But the Russians take the point as carte blanche to mount security patrols outside South Ossetia and to keep forces deployed in Georgia.

Saakashvili insisted today that he would not be happy until the last Russian soldier had left. "Georgia will never give up a square kilometer of its territory," he said.

The "international mechanism", entailing perhaps UN-mandated international peacekeepers, will take weeks to establish at a minimum. The EU is endeavouring to be the main middleman. But apart from perhaps sending a few dozen unarmed ceasefire monitors in the days ahead, it is unlikely to grapple with the bigger issues of peacekeepers until EU foreign ministers meet in Avignon in France next month.

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